After Two Years:

A Study of Educational Transformation in Ten Minnesota Sites

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Introduction

In 1988, the Minnesota State Legislature established the Legislative Task Force on Education Organization, which began its work with the creation of a vision for Minnesota education in the 21st century. The Task Force then examined three issues: learning opportunities that Minnesota students would need to attain that vision; the requisite organizational changes to support such opportunities; and the funding processes required for the emerging system. Building on an existing environment for change, the legislature established the Office of Educational Leadership (OEL) in July, 1989. Its broad charge was to create a foundation on which Minnesota's education system could be transformed to better meet the needs of students and society into the next century.

The OEL was directed in enabling legislation to develop a plan for a two-year research and development project (1989-1991) to determine the effectiveness of an outcome-based system of education in improving student learning. The legislation stipulated a number of project components~~, including the following~~: a hierarchy of learner outcomes; varied means for achieving these outcomes; appropriate methods of assessing pupils' thinking and problem-

solving skills; an objective process for studying project outcomes performed by an independent evaluator; and networks for communicating the results of the research.

The OEL Research and Development (R&D) Project examined the effect of these processes designed to transform schools into structures that assure that all students succeed in learning. In September, 1989, ten R&D project sites, comprising 17 districts and five educational consortiums representing greater Minnesota, suburban, and urban communities, received grants of $100,000 from the OEL. For two years, OEL staff and school-based colleagues worked to operationalize the OEL's Minnesota Plan (Minnesota Department of Education, 1990), transforming their individual project and learning sites, developing leadership skills to support the change process, and networking with a variety of people and organizations. When the 1991 legislative session did not reauthorize the OEL (Mazzoni et al., 1992), the project ~~ended~~ completed its second and final year of operation on June 30, 1991.

Because broad-based transformation required new assumptions about how education will work in the future, research activities sought to identify policies and practices at the site, district, and

state levels that supported or hindered the change process. This paper presents the results of data collected during the second year of the project, specifically focusing on the documentation of change activities and their perceived effect on students, and factors that school personnel cited as affecting change at their site. We conclude with the lessons we learned, discussing implications for transformational school change.

OEL Project Definitions

Three broad concepts underlay project activities: outcome-based education (OBE); the OEL clinical outcomes; and educational transformation more generally. As indicated previously, OEL's enabling legislation stipulated an R&D project using a "learner outcome-based system of education." Outcome-based education, defined as "a way of defining, designing, developing, delivering, and documenting instruction in terms of its intended goals and outcomes" (Spady, 1988), is the centerpiece of much of Minnesota's current educational reform (Houston, 1989; Erickson et al., 1990). The competitive proposals that districts wrote for OEL funding in August, 1990, described their plans for OBE implementation and

experimentation, sometimes in a single program or building, other times across a district or group of districts. From 1989-1991, sites worked on their individual OBE change projects.

Simultaneously, OEL staff developed a process that included not only school-based projects, but leadership training and professional development for educational transformation. At the April, 1990 research planning meeting, site personnel received copies of the OEL clinical outcomes, i.e., 21 (later reduced to 16) broad outcomes of a transformed system of education that formed the basis of OEL training sessions. These include items like multi-age grouping, interdisciplinary teaming, and site-based governance, and served not as blueprints for change, but as focal points for discussion and experimentation.

There was a third notion around which the project turned. It was clear that the Minnesota districts participating in the OEL R&D effort were also involved in numerous other change-related activities (e.g., the SDE's Minnesota Educational Effectiveness Program--MEEP--and Planning, Evaluating, and Reporting or PER). Some efforts were supported internally; others were supported with outside funding. Given its legislative mandate, the OEL sought to

coalesce these activities and leverage funding to stimulate major changes in the traditional system of education, so that project sites over time could evolve to radically different states. Because project outcomes might therefore move beyond outcome-based education and even the OEL clinical outcomes, the term educational transformation rightly served as a third descriptor of ongoing activities.

While the distinctions among OBE, OEL clinical outcomes, and educational transformation make sense for analytical purposes, in practice school staff tended to group these under the single heading of "change activities our site was involved in." The findings discussed here speak in part to the challenge of making sense of change as project sites began a long-term R&D effort only in part funded by the OEL.

Methodology

From beginning to end, the OEL sought to model an approach to evaluation and research appropriate to its long-term transformational goals, and collaboration was central to its research process. OEL Phase I Evaluation Report, Volume I (1991)

presents in detail the design and methodology used to collect baseline data and the research and evaluation results generated from the first year study.[1] Volume II: Case Studies contains brief case study reports of ten district project sites and 29 learning sites.

The planning process for the second year's research continued collaboratively, with a network of project site representatives, OEL staff, and CAREI researchers jointly developing research questions and design. Phase II centered around a core study involving all sites and, on a demand basis, individual case studies (see Appendix A). The core study sought to document the following: activities occurring across project sites that were related to outcome based education (OBE), OEL outcomes, or educational transformation (ET); the perceived impact of these activities; related professional development activities and their perceived impact; and the perceived forces for and against transformational change across project sites.

The core study, combining qualitative and quantitative methods, involved four data collection formats: structured one–on–one interviews; structured group interviews; survey instrument(s); and records analysis. First, research staff conducted

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[1]See also King & Bosma, 1991.

one–on–one interviews with the network person and/or opinion leader of each project site and with the principal and/or opinion leader of each learning site.

Second, structured group interviews were conducted with the leadership group from each project site and with one group of teachers, one group of parents, and, if age appropriate, one group of students from each learning site. The group interviews with teachers and parents were limited to four to six individuals; the interviews with students included eight to twelve individuals.

Third, a survey instrument was administered to all administrators and instructional staff across all of the project and learning sites via bulk mailings, coordinated by the network person.

Finally, research staff compiled and reviewed various project site materials, entering them in the OEL archives.

This paper, then, is based on one–on–one interviews with 50 principals and/or opinion leaders across the learning sites and with 10 network members; structured group interviews with a leadership group from each project site; structured group interviews with 239 teachers, 175 parents, and 315 students across the learning sites; and the survey responses of 740 school administrators, teachers,

and other staff across 37 learning sites who returned usable surveys. This is 41 percent of all school personnel targeted to complete the survey and 92 percent of individuals scheduled for interviews.[2]

The following results are presented as the opinions and experiences of a sample of the total population of school personnel, students, and parents regarding the OEL R&D project. Any percentages reported were determined by dividing the number of responses or comments on a specific theme by the total number of individuals who responded to that question.

OEL R & D Project Findings

Change Activities

Overall, the study documented 187 different OBE/OEL/ET-related change activities at various stages of implementation across the ten project sites, for an average--to the extent that that

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[2] In our efforts to collaborate and to save postage, we relied on the network representatives to distribute surveys to the learning sites with which they were involved. The 41% reported here represents the percentage of surveys we mailed to them. We suspect that the response rate may actually be higher, but had no way of accurately tracking it once surveys were sent to individual learning sites. The trade-off between accuracy and feasibility was unavoidable and, in our opinion, worthwhile.

is meaningful--of 19 separate change activities per site. Generally speaking, these were difficult to categorize given the variety of activities being implemented and individuals' differing notions of the changes. However, the documented change activities fall into three broad categories: changes related to the reorganization or restructuring of certain aspects of schooling (38%); changes that sought to modify curriculum and instruction (30%); and changes related to staff and professional development activities (21%). (See Table 1). The single spaced, indented text presents representative examples.

Reorganizing/restructuring. The largest number of change-related activities (38 per cent) could be categorized as reorganizing or restructuring. Within this category 22 activities related to changes in school structures and schedules, e.g., using block scheduling, lengthening the school day, or providing collective planning time for teachers.

> In one school the staff was dissatisfied with the traditional six hour day. They developed a teaching team with an eight period day of 49 (rather than 55) minute periods. A four hour block of core subjects was structured with a one hour advisory or lunch with advisory group, two hours of music/home ec./industrial arts/PE, and one hour of an exploratory elective.

The second group of restructuring activities (16 activities) addressed school community involvement at the learning sites, for example, through increased communication to raise community awareness or through site-based decision-making to purposely bring more groups into the school's governance process.

> A group of districts in greater Minnesota developed a monthly newsletter to update parents on the transformation process in their children's schools. Administrators attributed increased levels of parental involvement to the improved communication.

> A school council at one learning site comprised parents, teachers, and community representatives. The group met once a month to discuss the work of numerous committees, including the Curriculum Committee, the Evaluation/Assessment Committee, and the Budget Committee. All members of the school community were welcome to attend these meetings.

Other activities specifically included multi-age/multi-level teaching, organized by either subject or developmental level.

> At one site, multi-age groups of 115 third and fourth grade students learned through "developmentally appropriate" practices such as flexible grouping, process-oriented outcomes, and activities that made students responsible for their own learning. Students set goals with teachers, and each student had his or her own schedule, often working at learning stations among four rooms.

Still others involved the use of individualized or personalized

learning plans.

> The program at one Area Learning Center (ALC)[3] was designed to meet individual needs and help students reach their potential. When each learner is admitted, he or she is evaluated for academic performance, vocational interests, and learning style. An individualized learning plan is written, then re-assessed as progress is made.

In addition were activities related to inclusion, i.e., efforts to help greater numbers of students succeed academically.

> In one school, targeted students were involved in a program for those typically identified "at risk." The students spent their mornings in "Base," a special program where they received help in self esteem issues as well as academic subjects. They attended regular classes in the afternoon.

Curriculum and instruction. A second category of change related activities (56 activities; 30 percent) focused on modifying existing curriculum and instruction. Thirty-one of these activities focused on curriculum changes, e.g., interdisciplinary curriculum development, the development of outcomes, or district-wide or departmental curriculum alignment.

> One district strategy was to provide curricular focus so the elementary school staff would stop "feeling a bit adrift in the

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[3] Area Learning Centers are one part of Minnesota's choice program. They are designed to meet the needs and alternative learning styles of students who have dropped out of traditional high school.

curriculum." Instructional staff reviewed the entire curriculum, identified curricular problems, and asked, "What's do-able?" Using the district curriculum and state learner outcomes, grade level teams worked to discover where specific curricular concepts fit into the larger learning picture and "to provide a smoother learning transition from grade to grade." The "sixth grade outcomes from the district curriculum drove the design."

Another 25 activities focusing on altering instruction to fit the "OBE paradigm," e.g., by organizing instruction to insure that students attained pre-specified outcomes or by teaming or other collaborative teaching approaches.

> One small district instituted "Help-Get Help," a peer and teacher coaching system that allowed for remediation from teachers or students on a scheduled, in-school basis. The response was mostly positive, and students reported that it helped them understand what they know or to get help from others. Students felt that they could explain things better or "in my language."

Professional development. Staff development activities (40 activities; 21 percent) created the third largest category of change efforts. Eighteen activities directly related to OBE or OEL, helping educators understand the methods and implications of implementing outcome-based education. The OEL activities were conducted either as "summer clinicals" or, during the year, as "leadership cadres."

Student assessment. The final category of change activities

(20 activities; 11 per cent) involved innovative student assessment. Within this category, ten activities focused on experimenting with alternate grading systems.

> One high school implemented a grading policy that did away with D's and F's, to allow the few students who failed classes and those who did not complete their work an opportunity to catch up rather than flunk. Teachers used the Guskey mastery model, focusing on appropriate outcomes and prescribing remediation or enrichment activities

In addition, a few sites reported the development of new or alternate forms of assessment, e.g., using multiple forms of student assessment.

> One site had report cards that are evaluation sheets so that, in the words of one student, "instead of getting S or N, now there is a column, [so] you know what area they're doing." "Students are not taking a lot of paper and pencil tests, but rather [are engaged in] small group discussions and manipulatives." Some teachers reportedly preferred the old report card because these new assessments don't "mean" anything and are "harder for the teacher."

Summary. By the end of its second year, the OEL R&D Project had clearly stimulated or supported a wide variety of change ~~efforts~~ activities at its ten project sites. Numerous efforts were underway to reorganize or restructure schooling, to move curriculum and instruction toward an outcome-based system, to help district

years"; "If you don't have OBE and get D's, you don't learn anything"; and "Teachers don't have to hold me back; they challenge me."

Teachers and principals reported similarly positive perceptions, including the following:

> A lot of kids have had years of failure and it's the first time they're experiencing some success. . . There's been a tremendous increase in student learning and a decrease in discipline problems.
>
> We have set higher expectations and students are achieving more. Test scores have increased, particularly math scores (from 36% in the lowest quartile to 17%).

Some parents also expressed a perception that better learning was occurring: "OBE has not allowed my son to fail"; and "The personal time teachers spent with my child benefitted her learning."

An effect of <u>increased involvement in learning</u> was evidenced by students who said:

> I'm pushing myself more. . . The day seems so much shorter. It goes by quicker; and
>
> I've learned a lot more this year than in the past.

Teacher/principal comments documented more involvement as well:

> Kids really take a stake in learning and are more responsible; and
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> There are fewer students who identify with failure.

One parent commented: "My child is really excited about school. That never would have happened when he wasn't a part of [an] interdisciplinary effort."

Some respondents reported advantages for slower students while others saw disadvantages for brighter students, evidencing the different effects of OBE on different student types. On the one hand, many parents felt OBE "works for the average and unmotivated learner"; on the other, as one parent put it, "My child doesn't think it is fair that she passes at 95% with one try and everyone else gets three more tries." Similarly, a high achiever at another site reportedly did not like the fact that other students were "rising to the top." However, as one teacher noted:

> Special ed. students are meeting mainstreamed outcomes the first time, without retakes. The students feel so proud of themselves. . .

A sense that OBE might show mixed results for bright students was reflected in statements such as the following:

> Admittedly we have picked up some we would've lost, but are losing some at the top;
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> Low learners prefer the new system; high achievers prefer [the] ABC system; and
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> We feel the higher students won't be challenged enough.

Summary. While the discussion of these perceived effects requires considerable caution, it provides something not yet available in the research literature (Evans & King, 1992): evidence--and much of it positive--of the potential effects of an outcome-based system on students. Statements from students, teachers, and parents alike supported claims of more and better learning, increased student involvement in learning, and the success of traditionally low achievers. However, the perception that the implementation of an outcome-based system may penalize high achievers, either by making them wait for others or by not addressing the special needs of the gifted, cannot be ignored.

Forces Perceived to Affect the Change Process

A further purpose of the Phase II study was to identify the forces or factors that, in the opinion of those involved, were either promoting or hindering the ongoing change process at their sites. This was to build, in part, on the results of Phase I research that suggested specific hindrances to the first year change process, e.g., competing priorities at the project sites (King & Bosma, 1991). The following data (Tables 3 and 4) were generated by open-ended

side is the awareness that change is needed, supported, and that dedicated teachers are ready to take on the challenge, coupled with transformational staff development and increased teamwork between teachers and administrators. On the negative side are the clear problems of resources and skeptical attitudes, an overwhelming sense of too much change, and questions of leadership, both at the district and state level.

Implications

The collaborative design of the Phase II study emphasized information that project site and OEL staff desired following the second year of the transformation process. Some of this was, in part, to document to the legislature that OEL activities were developing on schedule and that the changes actually made a difference for students, creating a signal (Zucker, 1981) that the project was on track and deserved reauthorization. Information on support and hindrances to the change process was needed at both the project and OEL level to suggest ways of proceeding into year 3, were that to be funded.

As was noted earlier, there was a broad range of ongoing

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---Check how to cite OEL Volumes 1 ~~and 2~~

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Appendix A. The Site Specific Studies

The purpose of the site specific studies was to study individual issues of interest at the request of project sites. The project network decided in December, 1990 that four days of the CAREI research assistants' time should be available upon request for each project site to use in designing and conducting its own site specific research/evaluation study. Three sites developed such studies.

At one site, administrators and instructional staff developed a set of project/learning site–specific questions to be included with the core survey questions administered at that project site. Although no formal analysis of the site–specific questions was done as a part of the OEL R&D project, CAREI provided ~~a set of~~ raw data output reports to the project sites that requested them.

At the other two sites, network members identified the questions they wanted their study to focus on. After the topic was determined, the lead investigator and research assistant from CAREI worked with project site staff to develop a research design. The research assistants were then available to assist in

data collection and analysis.

In addition, a fourth site requested the creation of an OBE "literacy test." CAREI staff developed the CAREI Outcome–Based Education Literacy Test (COBELT) and a related version for parents (Bosma & King, 1992).